

Grading and Giving Feedback on Student Work

General Guidelines

Grading and feedback are among the most powerful ways in which teachers communicate with students. They are interconnected tools for teachers to express what they think students should be learning, and for helping students make progress toward those goals. In order for students to understand and make use of grades and feedback, faculty need to ensure:

- **Purpose:** Consider and tell students the purpose of both grades and feedback in any course. Are grades a measure of achievement? A comparison to other students? A comparison to an absolute standard? What should students do with the feedback they receive – incorporate it into the next assignment? Use it to study for exams? Employ it in later courses or their career? Transparency about purpose helps students align their expectations and actions with those of their instructors.
- **Clarity:** Whatever grading standards are employed within a course should be set forth in the syllabus clearly at the beginning of the term. When students do not know how they are being evaluated, grades become a game of guessing what the instructor wants rather than learning the content and skills at the heart of the course. Likewise, feedback to students needs to be expressed clearly, offering an explanation of what students are doing well, what they need to work on, and how to go about improving.
- **Consistency:** Maintaining consistent grading standards across a large course can be challenging. Discussing the grading standards with the entire course staff, using a rubric, and cross-checking grading between section leaders are all good practices that can help.

Frequency of Feedback

In designing a course, the instructor should consider providing opportunities for students to submit written work or problem sets. While the main purpose is to give them the opportunity to course-correct in response to feedback and thereby improve their work, it also allows the instructor to calculate the final grade on a broader basis than one or two exams or a term paper. Year after year, student surveys indicate that it is almost impossible to overstate the importance of thoughtful, actionable comments and quick turnaround, or the resentment of students whose assignments were returned after the exam rather than before it.

Feedback on Exams

If an instructor gives a less than perfect score on a question (e.g., 13 out of 15 points), it pays to write a few words to explain why. That takes more time when grading, but less than one might think. The trick is to find just a couple of words to identify common errors – which is one reason why it's usually more efficient to grade all the answers to one question before starting on another. Moreover, even a brief comment saves time later on, for it eliminates many student concerns about the way the exam was graded, while with those who still complain you don't have to reread the exam to see why you took points off.

Grading Efficiently

For additional strategies on making grading both effective and efficient, see “Making Grading More Time-Efficient” in Walvoord & Anderson’s *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment in College*, 2010 (available for check-out from the SLATE Library), summarized here:

- Strategy 1: Find Out What the Student Knows
- Strategy 2: Do Not Waste Time on Careless Student Work
- Strategy 3: Do Not Extensively Mark Grammar and Punctuation
- Strategy 4: Address Fundamental Concerns First
- Strategy 5: Consider Comments without Grades
- Strategy 6: Use Comments Only for Teaching Moments
- Strategy 7: Spend More Time Guiding
- Strategy 8: Use Only as Many Grade Levels as You Need
- Strategy 9: Limit the Basis for Grading
- Strategy 10: Ask Students to Organize Their Work for Your Efficiency
- Strategy 11: Delegate the Work
- Strategy 12: Use Technology to Save Time and Enhance Results
- Strategy 13: Keep a Grading Log